

Original Research

Reimagining social inclusion in sports through sports Mega-events: Indigenous Peoples and Olympic bids**Dilara Valiyeva¹, Inge Hermanrud¹, Anna-Maria Strittmatter²**¹University of Inland Norway²Örebro University*Corresponding author email: dilara.valiyeva@inn.no***ABSTRACT**

Within the settler and nation-states, the idea of social inclusion clashes with the rights of Indigenous Peoples for self-determination and sovereignty, as distinctive Indigenous worldviews and historical assimilation processes are not being considered. Inclusion, in most cases, presupposes assimilation into mainstream sports models. Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars call for reconsidering the core ideas of social inclusion. This paper explores how social inclusion in and through sport mega-events is understood and experienced by Sámi and non-Indigenous people. With the help of *Árbediehtu* (Sámi traditional knowledge) and critical thematic analysis (CTA), we suggest a more nuanced approach to social inclusion with and for Indigenous Peoples, which includes: (a) identity and cultural safety, (b) value of Indigenous cultures and knowledge, and (c) historical and current needs and backgrounds. Despite the broad political argumentation that the sports context provides great opportunities for inclusion, our results suggest that sports is a difficult context for enacting an Indigenous identity. The difficulty lies among other things in the sport-for-all policy view, in which Sámi do not always (want to) identify with. The findings can inform future sports event organisers and policy makers within mainstream sports system.

INTRODUCTION

Social inclusion has become a central concept in contemporary political discourse, particularly in the context of sport, where it is often framed as a means of fostering equity, improvement of access, and participation for marginalized groups (Inoue & Forneris, 2015; Mair et al., 2023; Undlien, 2019). Despite its widespread use, social inclusion remains contested and multifaceted. Social inclusion is often understood as the ability of individuals or groups to fully participate in societal activities, with access

to quality services, education, and healthcare (Gidley et al., 2010). However, participation alone does not guarantee social inclusion, particularly for Indigenous Peoples, such as Sámi in Norway. The path to social inclusion is complex and fraught with historical, cultural, and socio-economic barriers (Hunter, 2009; Hunter & Jordan, 2010; Smith & Smith, 2023). In many cases, inclusion is hindered by deep-rooted issues such as discrimination, land dispossession, and the erosion of cultural practices, as well as Indigenous knowledge and languages (Hansen, 2022; Hunter & Jordan, 2010; Menzies, 2019). Social inclusion is often framed in opposition to social exclusion, which provides a useful but incomplete understanding of the challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples (Hansen, 2022; Hunter & Jordan, 2010). Indigenous communities experience exclusion in unique ways that extend beyond the typical factors such as poverty or gender discrimination. They must also contend with the legacies of colonialism, including the loss of traditional lands, cultural assimilation, and the marginalization of their knowledge systems (Menzies, 2019).

Indigenous worldviews have been applied in sport for development to address social inclusion and Indigenous issues, for example, using land-based approaches to support reconciliation (Greey & Arellano, 2023; Millington et al., 2019; Paraschak & Heine, 2020), exploring decolonization through Indigenous pedagogy (Seiler & Chepyator-Thomson, 2023), and interpreting sport through a decolonizing Kaupapa Māori lens (Smith & Smith, 2023). While Indigenous voices and epistemologies are incorporated in SFD, these contributions remain limited (Greey & Arellano, 2023; Millington et al., 2019; Stewart-Withers & Hapeta, 2023), particularly in relation to Sámi with some exceptions (see Skille & Fahlén, 2020; Skille et al., 2021). This literature gap highlights a broader issue within SFD, where Indigenous-informed scholarship has been theoretically and empirically underrepresented (Stewart-Withers et al., 2023). Despite calls for

Keywords: Sámi, Olympic Games, Legacy, Indigenous Knowledge, Sports

decolonization in sports and research practices (Norman & Hart, 2017), Indigenous perspectives are still often viewed through Western analytical lenses, which continue to undermine the richness of Indigenous worldviews.

Both within sport studies and (sport) event management scholarship, Indigenous perspectives remain peripheral or unacknowledged, with scholars drawing the link to academia and knowledge production that do not actively engage with Indigenous concepts and paradigms (Calver et al., 2023; Chen & Mason, 2019; Macdonald et al., 2023). As a result, research on social inclusion in sport largely fails to account for the unique experiences of Indigenous Peoples, their cultural identity, autonomy, and self-determination. Existing studies on inclusion of Indigenous Peoples and sport mega-events have explored the topics of hosting on Indigenous lands (O'Bonsawin, 2023), motivations behind inclusion, such as avoiding protest, athlete identity (O'Bonsawin, 2015), the politics of promoting multiculturalism, and advancing reconciliation (Elder et al., 2006), as well as ethnicised narratives of national identity (Hogan, 2003). Despite this growing body of work, Indigenous social inclusion remains marginal in official Olympic legacy and bidding documents. Case studies from e.g., Sydney 2000 and Vancouver 2010 suggest that while Indigenous cultures, land rights, and cooperation are often acknowledged, these efforts are typically framed through non-Indigenous interpretations (Valiyeva et al., 2024). Inclusion narratives across these cases, despite their differences in geography, timing, and Olympic status (realised or not), remain shaped by postcolonial and assimilationist logic, with limited long-term impacts for Indigenous communities. Existing research indicates a persistent lack of commitment to sustained, Indigenous-led legacy initiatives. Inclusion is often instrumentalized to support national identity, rather than fostering genuine social transformation. The argument for including Indigenous Peoples is present in bids for the Olympic Games, including the most recent bid for Brisbane 2038.

We aim to reimagine the concept of social inclusion in and through sports by exploring how it can be understood and interpreted through the lens of Indigenous ways of knowing, particularly in the context of Sámi in Norway. We specifically focus on two significant, yet unsuccessful, Winter Olympic bids: Tromsø 2014 and 2018, in which one of the formulated goals was to foster Sámi inclusion. The Norwegian sports context is interesting because historically, Olympic bids are initiated from the mainstream sports movement, where national sport policy discourses are directly transferred as the main argumentation for Olympic bids (Strittmatter, 2016). The canceled bids for the winter

Olympics represent the intersection of sport, process of bidding and planning for mega-events, social inclusion, and Indigenous identity.

With this backdrop, our research question is: how is social inclusion in and through sports mega-events bidding understood and experienced by Sámi and non-Indigenous people? By investigating the viewpoints and experiences of Sámi and non-Indigenous participants within Sámi Valáštallan Lihttu (SVL or Sámi Sports Organizations), The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF), as well as those involved in the bidding and inclusion programmes, we offer new insights into how sport and sport mega-events bidding can be reimagined as a tool for social inclusion with the potential implications for self-determination. Social inclusion has been primarily studied in relation to Indigenous Peoples in countries such as Canada, the United States of America (Absolon, 2016; Cornell & Jorgensen, 2019), Australia (Hunter & Jordan, 2010), and New Zealand (Gidley et al., 2010). We propose an additional framework by bringing Sámi perspectives and knowledge into the conversation and expanding the social inclusion literature from a European context.

Context: Sámi and Sámi Sports

Sámi are Indigenous People living in Sápmi (land of Sámi), which covers the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and northeast Russia. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the Norwegianization policy – assimilation – was practiced to create a united national identity (Skille et al., 2025), resulting in a loss of language, culture, traditional ways of living and being (Josefsen & Broderstad, 2024). Although this policy formally ended, importantly through political activism during the Alta controversy in the 1970s, it played an important role in increasing the visibility of Sámi issues and stimulating a resurgence of Sámi culture and identity (Alakorva, 2022). This led to the creation of Sámi Valáštallan Lihttu (SVL or Sámi Sports Association) in 1990 (Pedersen, 2021). In the same year, Norway ratified Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (No. 169) (ILO, n.d.), making it the only country with Sámi population to have done so. Sweden and Finland justified the non-ratification to the land rights' issues (Semb, 2012), and thus differ from their neighbour country. In June 2023, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission presented a report to the Storting (the Norwegian Parliament), in which they investigated the Norwegianization policy and injustice towards Sámi, Kven and Norwegian Finns, and Forest Finns (Forsoningskommisjonen, 2023). While Sámi have a status as Indigenous People, Kven and Norwegian Finns, and Forest Finns have a status of national minority

(Forsoningskommisjonen, 2023). Even though it is an extensive report with almost 700 pages with recommendations for reconciliation, “sport” is mentioned only once in connection to people who shared their stories.

Despite the actions mentioned above, the relationships among Sámi communities, within sports clubs, and between Sámi and Norwegians are still being impacted (Skille et al., 2025). By organizing both unique Sámi sports, reindeer racing and lassoing, and ‘universal’ sports, SVL creates opportunities not only for revitalisation of Sámi sports and strengthening inclusion for local communities (SVL, 2023) but also for Sámi ethnic identity building and expression of empowerment and belonging through Sámi culture and language (Skille, 2013; Skille & Sam, 2024). Additionally, sporting events such as the national championship in reindeer racing, and the Arctic Winter Games, which celebrate the unique sports and cultural traditions of the Arctic, also play a role and represent pride (Skille et al., 2025). Such events and everyday sports practices create a separate arena for Sámi youth, athletes, and Sámi sports to encourage Sámi communities and identity (Skille et al., 2021; Skille & Sam, 2024). Sámi sport in Norway continues to face funding, recruitment, and visibility challenges, among other things (Skille, 2022b; Skille et al., 2021; Skille & Sam, 2024). Lehtonen et al. (2023) raise concerns regarding the policy of minorities’ inclusion into mainstream sports, which “does not recognize Sámi sport in any concrete practices” (p. 14).

The Dilemmas of Inclusion for Indigenous Identity

Over the globe, many Indigenous Peoples may reject inclusion, as it might present them as another ethnic group among others, as also non-sport-related literature emphasizes (Castles, 1997). Some argue that true inclusion should not involve assimilation but recognition of diversity and an equal place for Indigenous cultures and identities in the broader societal picture (Niezen, 2003; Somby & Olsen, 2025). Inclusive actions should be based on the analysis of the impact of colonialism on Indigenous Peoples and try to reverse it (Kymlicka, 2010). Sámi can, for example, experience cross-pressure between being part of the majority society and at the same time experiencing stigmatization or marginalization due to their Indigenous background. Balto (1997) uses the terms simple society and complex society to distinguish how traditional Sámi society and modern Sámi society are organized. In the simple society, identity formation was defined in Sámi communities. However, in a complex society, identity formation is taken over by schools and also, to some extent, sports organizations (Skille, 2020).

Sociologists look at how identity is shaped through interaction with other people and through the social context in which the individual finds himself. Identity is, therefore, not only something personal but also a product of societal expectations, the norms and values surrounding us. By taking an intersectional perspective, the focus changes from seeing identity as a possession, something essential and held by individuals, to considering the processes of identification and the power relations embedded in these processes (Anthias, 2006). As such, identity only makes sense as a relational concept. Therefore, identity cannot be perceived as something we freely choose (Thorjussen & Sisjord, 2020). For instance, a person might identify as a Sámi but be seen as a Norwegian woman. The terms like multiple and fragmented have been proposed to describe when identities are complex (Thorjussen & Sisjord, 2020). Fragmented identities involve a sense of division or conflict, where different parts of one’s identity do not match or do not fit together. Multiple identities point to the diversity of identities that we can have and how these can exist in parallel and in different social contexts without necessarily conflicting with each other. Recognizing and supporting the agency of Indigenous Peoples requires challenging Western-centric logics. This includes understanding aspects of identity and centering Indigenous-led planning from the outset. This is why, we see the traditional Indigenous knowledge as important to consider when studying social inclusion of Indigenous Peoples.

Árbediehtu (Sámi Traditional Knowledge)

“Árbediehtu is the collective wisdom and skills of the Sami people used to enhance their livelihood for centuries. It has been passed down from generation to generation both orally and through work and practical experience. Through this continuity, the concept of árbediehtu ties the past, present and future together” (Porsanger & Guttorm, 2012, p. 18). We employ Guttorm’s (2011) definition of “Árbediehtu (in general, traditional knowledge) and árbečehppodat (traditional skill), which are concepts that relate to possessing knowledge, i.e. having knowledge about something (diehtu) and having knowledge in something (máhttu)” (Guttorm, 2011, p. 60). Guttorm (2019) highlights its complexity, being “embedded in the Sámi language and everyday life”. Porsanger and Guttorm (Guttorm, 2019; Porsanger, 2011; Porsanger & Guttorm, 2012) explore the use of Sámi concepts as analytical tools across academic fields. Indigenous concepts are increasingly used regarding inclusion, for example, Sámi perspectives in teacher education (Somby & Olsen, 2025) and framework for social inclusion from Ojibwe worldview (Absolon, 2016). Indigenous epistemologies contribute to knowledge production, decolonization of academia,

reconciliation, and self-determination (Greedy & Arellano, 2023; Helander-Renvall, 2010; Nijdam, 2023). Diehtit can be understood as “knowledge of an action”, and máhttit – as “the ability to perform the action” (Guttorm, 2011, p. 62). This means that one can have knowledge *about* inclusion (*diehtit*), which covers: learning about inclusion through education and work, experiencing inclusion in different spheres of life, designing and putting in practice inclusive programs and initiatives. However, people who do not have lived experience of being excluded, discriminated or having intergenerational trauma do not have the same knowledge as those who have knowledge *in* inclusion (*máhttit*). “Personal experience is a prerequisite for the assertion that a person possesses a certain skill (*máhttu*)” (Guttorm, 2011, p. 62). In our case, Indigenous Peoples have unique experiences and viewpoints that are tightly connected to identity, culture, and language, and thus Indigenous knowledge can help to remodel Western interpretations (Lovern, 2017), such as the concept of inclusion. The concept guided both our methodological choices as well as the construction of the findings, which will be explained in the following section.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

An ongoing discussion about whether non-Indigenous researchers should study Indigenous issues is deeply connected to questions of decolonization and reconciliation, as highlighted by Kilian et al. (2019), Kwame (2017), McCartan et al. (2022), Sand (2023), and Skille (2022a). These scholars emphasize the prerequisites for engaging in ethical Indigenous research, including positionality, self-reflexivity, reciprocity, respect, dialogue, relationality, and the principle that research must benefit Indigenous Peoples. Although this article is not purely grounded in an Indigenous paradigm, our approach is informed by a Sámi concept and a critical thematic analysis (CTA) that enable us to explore different understandings through embracing Indigenous ways of knowing, exercising critical reflexivity, and emphasising respect for self-determination.

Authors' Positionality

The first author of this article is a Central Asian immigrant woman with predominantly Kazakh heritage, though of mixed descent. The history of collectivisation (Iashchenko, 2025) and Russification (Smagulova, 2008), which led to the destruction of traditional cultural practices, the suppression of nomadism, and the loss of the Kazakh language, as well as her family's stories about the consequences of these, created a shared and trusting foundation that helped connect with Sámi informants during interviews. The second author is a white male native

Norwegian, and the third author is a white immigrant woman with German roots. The first author is a doctoral student, while the second and third authors are her supervisors. During the writing process, we discussed our distinct yet overlapping backgrounds and experiences. We came together with a shared intention to contribute to broadening the understanding of the concept of inclusion in a sporting context and to the decolonization of research.

As a non-Indigenous research group, we have become increasingly aware of the complexities and ethical considerations inherent in engaging with Indigenous issues, especially when exploring the experiences and perspectives of Sámi in Norway (Kuokkanen, 2000; Porsanger, 2011). Despite different social and cultural backgrounds, all authors were trained within the dominant Western research paradigm. This positionality brings both privileges and limitations. While we approach this research intending to learn and contribute meaningfully to Indigenous scholarship, we recognize the power dynamics between ourselves, as outsiders, and Sámi (Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011; Kovach, 2021; Lindblom, 2019). We are committed to decolonizing our research by challenging and deconstructing Western-centric approaches that often marginalize or misinterpret Indigenous knowledge systems, worldviews, and experiences (Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011; Henhawk, 2023; Smith, 2022). This commitment involves critically reflecting on how our backgrounds and biases may influence our interpretation of Indigenous issues, ensuring that we approach this work with humility, respect, and a deep awareness of the historical and ongoing effects of colonialism. We strive to honor Indigenous epistemologies by engaging with them in ways that center Indigenous voices, methodologies, and self-determination (Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011), recognizing the inherent value of Indigenous knowledge and practices (MacLean, 2019).

At the same time, we acknowledge that true decolonization cannot be achieved solely through academic work; it is a continuous, collective process that requires collaboration, listening, and learning from Indigenous Peoples. We remain open to feedback and critique from Indigenous communities, scholars, and knowledge keepers, and recognize the need for a much larger movement for justice, self-determination, and cultural resurgence.

Data Collection

We combined semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Study participants were selected by one or more of the following criteria: 1) either were directly connected to the bids and/or the planning of the Games and its legacy as practitioner, academic, or politician; 2) worked with

inclusion and sports politics; 3) worked with Sámi related inclusion and/or Sámi sports. We conducted 15 interviews (five female and ten male), engaged in email communication with three more individuals, who provided additional insights and/or shared relevant documents on inclusion practices related to sport and the Olympic bids, but did not participate in the interview. The participants were Sámi (n=4), Norwegian with Sámi heritage (n=2), non-Indigenous Norwegian (n=8) and non-Indigenous non-Norwegian (n=1), quoted as P1 to P15. The six Sámi participants have diverse backgrounds: Sámit (Northern Sámi), Áhpesápmi (Sea or Coastal Sámi), Kven and Norwegian Finns, Julevsábme (Lule Sámi). All interviews were conducted by the first author in Norwegian (n=12) and English (n=3). We aimed to have an equal number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. However, due to the lack of Sámi representation in the planning of the event bids and the work on inclusion, we were unable to achieve this balance. The interviews lasted between 32 and 96 minutes (M=61 min.) and were conducted in person (n=6) and via video-chat on Teams (n=9), with all interviews voice-recorded through a secure online service (Nettskjema) and a physical recorder. The interview guide was designed to elicit rich and reflective accounts related to the participants' roles, experiences, and understandings of inclusion in the context of sports as well as sport mega-event planning. Questions were shaped by existing literature related to social inclusion in sport and sport events in specific, postcolonial critique, and reconciliation processes in Indigenous–non-Indigenous relations. Examples of questions were: What does inclusion mean to you? What must be in place for you to feel included? Has your understanding of inclusion changed over time, particularly since the Tromsø bids? Have you experienced that Sámi inclusion was carried out in the Tromsø bids? If so, how? Can you describe the process/practices?

In addition to the interviews, we analyzed 20 documents to triangulate data. Some documents were received from participants, while the rest were retrieved from the Tromsø library and city archive. The documents related to the two bids, Sámi inclusion, legacy, critique, opposition, and culture.

Data Analysis

We applied Guttorm's (2011) understanding of traditional knowledge alongside CTA, as proposed by Lawless and Chen (2019) to explore interpretations and meanings of inclusion by Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. Lawless and Chen's (2019) CTA is used "to critically examine the interrelationships between interview discourses, social practices, power relations, and

ideologies" (p. 92). CTA builds on Owen's (1984) repetition, recurrence, and forcefulness criteria. While repetition is about the same words and phrases, recurrence refers to repetition of the meaning; forcefulness deals with how the participants speak (Lawless & Chen, 2019). Forcefulness was essential to understand how the identified themes connect with the experiences and cultural identity of participants as well as social and historical contexts and hegemonic structures (Lawless & Chen, 2019). Even though the study focus was about social inclusion and Olympic bids, the participants drew very much on their experiences from sport context in general. During open coding, the first author made notes regarding repetition, recurrence, and forcefulness (Lawless & Chen, 2019). For instance, when a participant discussed feelings or experiences of exclusion, discrimination, or other uncomfortable or upsetting topics, but then responded to these statements with a smile, laughter, or a joke, the first author coded these separately (as forcefulness). Guttorm's (2011) understanding of traditional knowledge allowed us to identify how traditional knowledge, rooted in Sámi language, identity, and everyday life shapes understandings of inclusion beyond standard policy frameworks, or in our case, institutionalised definitions in the Olympic bid from mainstream sports organisations that mainly represent mainstream sport development ambitions (see Strittmatter, 2016).

Our data generation method, although primarily based on the Western way of data collection, is culturally adapted for use with Indigenous Peoples (Mbah et al., 2022), in which both informed consent and verification of transcripts (Sandoval-Rivera, 2020) for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants were ensured. Sámi participants were provided with two versions of the draft of the article: a full and a shortened version with only introduction and the findings and discussion sections. This was done to be mindful of their time, allowing to choose preferred versions. By sharing the findings with the Indigenous participants and asking for feedback, we attempted to engage and support them, facilitate co-construction of findings and discussion, ensure the clarity of our interpretation, and disseminate results to participants, as highlighted by George et al. (2023). There were also informal meetings and email communication, which helped strengthen the relationship between the author and Indigenous participants, making sure our interpretation is sound with their experiences considering Guttorm's (2011) framework.

We attempt to contribute to the decolonization of research by employing culturally modified method of data generation and by building an analysis on a Sámi concept, as emphasised by Porsanger (2004).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To answer our research objective about how social inclusion in and through sports and sport mega-events is understood and experienced by Sámi and non-Indigenous people, this section is structured around key themes that clarify how different understandings were expressed by participants. We structure this section as follows: first, we provide understandings of social inclusion in sports, beginning with the broader concept of social inclusion in sports through the sport-for-all ethos. We then explore the understanding of inclusion in sports from Sámi perspective. Next, we examine Sámi inclusion in the context of the Olympic bidding process. Finally, we delve into reimagining social inclusion within the broader framework of sports and sports mega-event bids, considering how these events can serve as platforms for ensuring social inclusion of Indigenous (Sámi) Peoples. We chose this structure to foreground the variations and tensions in how social inclusion is defined and constructed within the context of the Olympic bids. These differences became particularly visible in discussions related to the sport context in general, where conflicting interpretations hinted towards deeper issues around representation and recognition. Highlighting these divergent perspectives first in the sport system offers a clearer lens through which to understand the broader dynamics at play in sport contexts, and how they are translated to sport mega-events in specific.

Understandings of Social Inclusion in Sports

Understanding of Social Inclusion in Sport in General: The Sport-for-all Ethos

Social inclusion within Norwegian sports is primarily understood as the goal of integrating all individuals into mainstream sports activities, a common sentiment expressed by several participants (P5, P7, P9). For example, P9 formulates: “we want everyone in” and “everyone should be involved and welcomed in Norwegian sports.” This reflects a broad, inclusive ethos aimed at ensuring that people from all backgrounds are welcomed into the sporting community. However, P9 shares that “even when certain groups, like refugees, are placed in separate teams or activities initially, the ultimate aim is to integrate them into regular sports teams”. This idea of integration into mainstream sports teams is echoed by P7. Initiatives that are, for example, tailored towards specific minority groups, are described as being inclusive and are seen as a temporary step toward inclusion of minority groups into mainstream teams. These groups mainly target refugees and immigrants who do not know the Norwegian sports system. Despite this formulated emphasis on inclusion, the approach often

overlooks the distinct needs and cultural contexts of national minorities like Kven and Norwegian Finns, Forest Finns, and particularly Sámi. A non-Indigenous participant recognizes the importance of cultural sensitivity and cooperation: “one can have Sámi competitions and meeting places across national borders” (P4). However, another participant explains that one must reflect over the differences between mainstream sports and Sámi sports:

It may well be that it is important for SVL to continue offering sports for the Sami, but at the same time if it is to be included, it must be a part of the mainstream sports system... I believe that SVL organizes sports in the same way as NIF does, so if one should try including Sámi sports in the main system, the focus must be on the differences in sports themselves and their content, and maybe other values”. (P5)

Another understanding of inclusion discussed by participants is about structures that do not create barriers. P5, P7, and P9 explain that the key to inclusion is removing economic, cultural, and language barriers, making the pathway into sports easier for all individuals. As P7 explained, their role within the sports council is to ensure that as many people as possible, especially young people, are given the chance to engage in sports, emphasizing the importance of minimizing these barriers. Moreover, participants shared that public funding is necessary to support children from low-income families and ensure they can participate in sports, further reinforcing the need for structural collaboration between sports organizations and governmental bodies:

there are 100,000 children in Norway who grow up in low-income families. If we are to be an organization for everyone, we must also facilitate their inclusion in our movement... We cannot do it alone... We must ensure that the authorities can also provide money so that children from low-income families are truly included. (P5)

There are economic and structural challenges. I think we can gain a lot from collaborating better. Because we can do quite a lot if we join forces. If the school, sports, culture, volunteers, and parents join forces, then I think you can achieve a lot. But that kind of coordination requires finances. (P7)

The removal of barriers, again, points toward understanding inclusion as participation, which is applied to different vulnerable and marginalised groups through focused initiatives and programmes, e.g., free training opportunities for children from low-income families. However, when it comes to Sámi inclusion, their needs and backgrounds are

unintentionally overlooked by NIF because they either do not fit to already defined social inclusion strategies or there is a lack of knowledge regarding social exclusion in the sport system of the nation-state (Consulting, 2023). For example, non-Indigenous and Sámi participants within NIF shared: “I have never heard of any special work being done for Sámi. Yes, I just thought they were included in the regular sports team” (P9) and “we don’t have any specific initiatives that directly target Sámi, they are, in a way, considered a part of our general inclusion strategy” (P7). These quotes highlight the lack of awareness and challenges in the mainstream sport system that Sámi face, contributing to the construction of inclusion practices that often place Sámi in predefined vulnerable groups. By overlooking the lack of knowledge regarding specific needs of Indigenous Peoples, and the ongoing use of Eurocentric understanding of the inclusion concept may hinder decolonization and reinforce assimilation ideas:

If you are unfamiliar with the sport, if you are new to the country, if your parents have no experience whatsoever with the sport, then it is... of course...Less likely that their children will participate. So if there is someone with a Sámi background who is not familiar with the sport then they will fall into the target group. I'm not familiar with certain measures towards Sámi people, but our goal is to get everyone involved in sports. (P9)

Although there is an understanding that Sámi might fall into one of the vulnerable groups and thus be included anyway, this approach does not account for the distinct needs and challenges that Indigenous Peoples face. We interpret this as, even though Sámi and other minority non-Indigenous participants are welcomed, the mainstream inclusion idea of sport-for-all dominates. The consequence of this idea might become an escape hatch for making changes that really promote inclusion of some groups, like Sámi. The lack of focus on the inclusion of Sámi among sports organizations, locally as well as at the national levels, can be explained by a lack of knowledge, as P15 states: “The biggest problem is that the majority population generally has very little knowledge [about Sámi], they have not learned any at school”.

To summarize, we have found that Sámi identity, prominent in Sámi sports, is nearly absent in mainstream sports. Our findings suggest that it is difficult to enact one's own identity as a Sámi in sports. This can be explained by intersectionality (Anthias, 2006) and the fact that Sámi identities are difficult to enact in some contexts (Bjørklund, 2016). Sport is a difficult context for enacting a Sámi identity when the sport-for-all ethos dominates. This is because inclusion in the sports-for-all ethos is limited to

inclusion of marginalized groups. Sámi often do not fit the description of or want to identify with.

Understanding of Sámi Inclusion in Sports – an Indigenous Perspective

The experiences of Sámi highlight the challenges and the opportunities for creating meaningful inclusion on personal and structural levels within the Norwegian sports systems. One recurring theme is the tension between integration and segregation. One participant from SVL (P3) noted the uncertainty experienced by new groups when trying to register:

We don't have any formal cooperation with NIF. The only thing we have is an informal or tacit collaboration. This means that NIF is fine with the fact that if you are a member of NIF, you are also a member of our organization [SVL]. And we see this now when new sports are joining, they are uncertain about whether they can register with us. (...) So, there's this informal arrangement where two sports confederations exist alongside each other.

Sámi organizations have often had to seek permission or clarification from NIF, resulting in a “silent” organizational structure in which two sports federations operate parallel to each other (Skille & Fahlén, 2020). This situation reflects the complexity of integrating Sámi athletes into the broader sporting system while maintaining a distinct Sámi identity. This dual structure raises questions about the necessity of a separate Sámi sports confederation.

Understanding of inclusion has also been expressed by the emotional experiences of Sámi participants (P3, P8, P10, and P11), which were coded as forcefulness that marks the importance of tone and voice (Lawless & Chen, 2019). In our case, it was mainly laughter/chuckling during the interviews by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants, which we analysed in relation to the topic that was discussed. For example, forcefulness helped us notice that in most cases Sámi participants chuckled whenever we talked about the topics related to self-determination and assimilation consequences, while with non-Indigenous participants we didn’t see a specific pattern that could be related to our article. Sámi informants also expressed emotions in a more somber tone, for example, one of the participants and the interviewer cried together when talking about intergenerational trauma and consequences of assimilation. P3 shared a painful moment of realizing the discrimination faced by Sámi children in sports, particularly when these young athletes felt compelled to suppress their Sámi identity to fit in:

I think that the awareness of promoting Sámi sports is much greater now than it has been in the past. In Sámi communities, we face a lot of discrimination, and children and young people are very vulnerable to it. So, trying to highlight Sámi life in a positive way is something we believe is necessary, but at the same time, we have to be careful because we know that even the word 'Sámi' provokes a lot of people. Children and young people say it's fine for them to wear traditional Sámi clothing, but when they start speaking Sámi, people get angry and they get insulted. (...) The only safe space for these children and young people is Sámi sports. It's the only place where they can speak Sámi, express their identity, and meet other Sámi children and young people from different areas. Outside of that, they feel they must suppress their identity just to survive in society.

The emotional toll of such exclusion was described as “terribly painful” (P3), reflecting the deep sense of alienation many Sámi feel within the broader Norwegian sporting community. This highlights the need for a more inclusive approach that allows for the expression of Sámi identity in sports without fear of discrimination. Moreover, the lack of dedicated Sámi sports facilities and the underrepresentation of Sámi sports in mainstream arenas has led to the creation of “safe spaces” for Sámi youth. According to P3, Sámi children often find the only “safe space” where they can express their identity is within Sámi sports. These spaces allow them to speak Sámi, express their cultural identity, and connect with other Sámi youth. Without these arenas, young Sámi athletes are forced to suppress their identity to navigate mainstream sports environments. Additionally, it is highlighted that “culture, language and identity are the foundational pillars of Sámi sport” (P3). This quote illustrates that Sámi sport is more than just about doing sports and, therefore, considering these pillars in the design of sport policies and sport mega-events would strengthen their inclusion. The following quote provides examples of practices and structures that can help to foster inclusion practices and highlights the importance of Sámi communities to actively approach local organizations, which then can support and create events that cater to Sámi needs and interests:

What is important here is that if there is a need or desire for it [focus on Sámi inclusion and Sámi sports], we need to be made aware of it. And then we can do something about it: create events and showcase the Sámi sports and Sámi events, help generate interest. We also must be there to cheer, to create those events. So we are happy to join the team, but we need help with organization based on the needs and wishes. (P7)

Both non-Indigenous and Sámi participants express a strong

sense that Sámi must be active participants in the creation of their own inclusion in Norwegian sports and sport events, rather than being passive recipients of imposed initiatives; this perception could create a barrier for self-determination.

Sámi Inclusion in Sports and the Olympic Bidding Process

The Olympic bids in Tromsø 2014 and 2018 provide insightful understandings and experiences of Sámi inclusion in the Norwegian sports context. In the application for the 2014 Olympics in Tromsø, Sámi participation was focused on culture and business development based on crafts and traditions. However, in 2018, the process (which stopped earlier), Sámi were to be included more broadly and deeply. This quote from a representative of the Norwegian Sámi National Federation Party, which we found in our document analysis illustrates:

This time Sámi are hosting. It means much more than showing off in a gákti [traditional Sámi clothing] and showing off reindeer. We will take part in all aspects of the event and planning. It gives us an opportunity to build new skills and develop the entire Sámi community. (Riikkasearvi, 2007)

However, the participants report that most discussions were more about the technicalities of an event rather than creating a legacy for Sámi communities (P3). The analysis of documents, organisation charts, plans, and minutes of meetings, reflects that Sámi issues were *on* the table and Sámi representatives were *at* the table in the planning stages of the bid. Tromsø 2014 condenses the various legacies they hoped for during the bidding:

For Sámi, Tromsø is an important center for education, research, health and culture. The ambitions for international Indigenous work are expressed through the Indigenous City of Tromsø concept. Sámi representatives have been involved in the Olympic work from the start, and Sámi will be a natural part of hosting if Tromsø is chosen for the 2014 Winter Olympics. The legacy before, during, and after an Olympics in Tromsø could be significant. An entire region, Sámi areas, the coast and the nation will get a boost. (AS, 2004, p. 5)

For the Tromsø 2018 bid, Sámediggi's (The Sámi Parliament) inclusion ideas were to unite Indigenous Peoples globally, in Northern regions and strengthen Sámi identity (Turi & Skarvik, 2006) . However, even though inclusion visions and efforts are considered in the bidding documents, there is a dilemma regarding maintaining or

reworking an Indigenous identity on one hand and inclusion on the other.

During the bidding and planning processes in both 2014 and 2018, the organising committee attempted to incorporate the theme of Sámi inclusion throughout different areas (symbols, language, cooperation with Sámediggi and representatives from art and culture), however, Sámi sports and Sámi sports representatives remained marginalised. The experience of a Sámi practitioner involved in the bid emphasizes the lack of inclusion:

We were just dragged in at the very end, so you can write in a bid [2014] that Sámi are involved (...). And for the 2018 bid process, we were in from the first meeting. We probably said that we don't think it's okay to be used as a decoration. How should I put it? Used as a painting. If we're going to be involved, we have to be involved in the whole process, right? (...) But we felt that it wasn't really okay. Because we weren't really included at all [in the 2014]. (...) And [for 2018] there was very little of what we said, that I think I remember, was taken seriously, to put it that way. (...) (P3)

The quote above resonates with the document analysis. The organization “Nei til OL (No to Olympics)” used, among other arguments, the lack of specification of what inclusion of the Indigenous population as an argument against hosting the games:

Tromsø 2018 (bidding organization) does not explain how Sámi sports dimensions to be strengthened. (...) The Council of Sámediggi says in a statement of 30.10.06 that “a Winter Olympics in the north can mean a lot for Sámi community and identity building” and “see it as only natural that Sámi host this event.” It is surprising that Tromsø 2018 bidding committee has not been able to specify how the Indigenous dimension is to be taken care of. (OL, 2007, p. 19)

These examples can be understood as a distinction of knowledge *about* and knowledge *in* where the Norwegian sport system and the bidding organizations have the knowledge about doing action (hence including Sámi), but there is a non-“ability to perform the action” (Guttorm, 2011). Another inclusion idea of Sámi in the bid was using the reindeer symbol. In the 1994 Winter Olympics in Lillehammer, Norway, the reindeer were used as a Sámi tribute and symbol; Indigenous Peoples have a special relation and connection with living non-human and non-living things like animals and land (Skille & Sam, 2024). While reindeer are a part of traditional culture, they are also an important part of Sámi life and sport (Skille & Sam,

2024). However, this inclusion was part of a cultural program that can be considered “showcasing” (Puijk, 2000). Over time, inclusion ideas progressed from showcasing to representation of Sámi sports and inclusion in the planning process. However, P15 emphasises the challenge of balance when it comes to big projects, like Olympics, that have international and national aspects:

It is more challenging to get things done on Sámi premises [self-determination]. It means that Sámi should recognize themselves in what is presented, and that it is not something like where you are just dressed up and exhibited, but that it is competence-building and that you present a genuine side of Sámi culture.

Reimagining Social Inclusion of Sámi in Sports and Sport Mega-event Bids

Social inclusion has been widely discussed, particularly for marginalized groups (e.g. Cobigo et al., 2012), but traditional frameworks often focus on conformity to dominant societal values, overlooking subjective aspects like feelings of belonging and cultural identity. A more comprehensive approach, which includes subjective measures of well-being, is needed. Our findings bring attention to the importance that sports events, including Olympic bidding, in Norway have the potential to better address the distinct needs of diverse populations, specifically Indigenous Peoples.

The different understandings and experiences from Sámi and non-Indigenous people from our findings illustrate that the notion of social inclusion must extend beyond a one-size-fits-all approach. While traditional metrics of inclusion often focus on visible participation in mainstream sporting activities, a more inclusive framework must account for the unique needs and experiences of Indigenous groups, whose historical and cultural backgrounds are often at odds with the expectations imposed by majority-led systems. For example, in the context of sports, the lack of Indigenous-specific strategies in the event bidding process or sports organizations may unintentionally overlook the social exclusion faced by Indigenous Peoples. This omission could stem from both a lack of awareness and knowledge of their specific needs, which comes from the educational system and dominant framework that define inclusion based on existing societal norms rather than on the lived experiences of Indigenous communities.

Derived from our findings and feedback and input from Sámi participants, we sensitize social inclusion of Sámi within sports mega-events based on three major themes: (a) identity and cultural safety, (b) value of Indigenous cultures

and knowledge, and (c) historical and current needs and background.

Identity and Cultural Safety

Our findings illustrate that social inclusion from Sámi perspective is often described as the feeling of being accepted and secure enough to express one's identity and (cultural) safety. As participants expressed "Inclusion for me is being able to feel safe showing my identity" (P10) and "it is only perhaps in Karasjok and Kautokeino [core Sámi areas] they [children and youth] have the opportunity to be Sámi". (P3)

Another statement echoes this when answering the question about experiencing racism or discrimination:

of course, many times (...) I find it very hurtful to know that my daughters or nephews and nieces have these experiences when they are performing and participating in sports events, especially in soccer. People are kind of full on adrenaline and can say quite upsetting and racist things, which can create quite a hostile atmosphere. I think that many coaches for youth soccer are not well prepared to address this, and many of them might be quite racist themselves and not realising that. (P11)

These sentiments reflect a central tenet of social inclusion: the ability to participate fully as yourself in society without fear of judgment, exclusion or discrimination. For many, feeling included means having the freedom to express oneself openly and authentically without the fear of being silenced or marginalised. This is especially important in environments where different cultural norms may be at play, such as in Norway, where cultural differences between Sámi and the cultural majority have historically been significant. When we look at the inclusion debate for the Olympic bid in relation to the inclusion of Sámi sports today and the participants' experiences, we can better understand why inclusion is so complicated. One point is that there is much more to Sámi sports than participation and competition; cultural and historical components play a central role— knowledge that gets overlooked by the Norwegian mainstream sport system and bidding organizations (Guttorm, 2011).

The concept of safety extends beyond physical safety to include emotional and cultural safety. The understanding that silence may imply consent in certain cultural contexts can be problematic for marginalized groups, as P10 noted: "Norwegians have a saying that goes as this: the one who remains silent agrees. But in Sámi it is the opposite, the one who remains silent disagrees". This statement highlights the

importance of understanding cultural differences in communication, where silence may indicate disagreement, not consent. Additionally, it is an example of how silence can be interpreted differently across cultures, demonstrating the limitations of the traditional view of social inclusion that cannot be reduced to mere participation or the outward signs of involvement. In our view, cultural awareness and the ability to show understanding for Sámi realities, as highlighted by P3 and P10 is a necessary first step for creating inclusive environments to actively create spaces where individuals are encouraged to express their opinions and identities.

Another important aspect of social inclusion is the feeling of belonging and emotional safety: "We have to truly feel that we belong and feel at home... that I have a place to be myself... to feel that the door is open when I come" (P7). The idea that social inclusion is not only about being acknowledged but also about the internal sense of comfort and security within a group. The sense of belonging is often intertwined with the idea of a "safe space" (P3), where individuals can participate without fear of rejection or discrimination. P8 expressed, inclusion is

that I mean something, that you see me, others see me and accept what they see because I am not perfect. I don't feel perfect, but I can feel more than good enough because we can be fantastic as a team.

This highlights that social inclusion is also deeply connected to fostering communal ties and a collective sense of security.

In the context of sports, social inclusion is seen as the responsibility of the majority to ensure that marginalized individuals feel safe and included. As P10 explained,

for example, to be alone as a Sámi among 50 others...it is the responsibility of the majority to take care of the one and make sure that the one feels safe and included. It doesn't necessarily have to be connected to sports, but all arenas.

P11 supports this argument:

they [NIF] have lots of resources, and the problem with the Truth and Reconciliation process is not that Sámi are engaged or Sámi are connected or giving input. The problem is that the dominant portion of the majority does not think it has anything to do with them.

This understanding stresses the importance of proactive efforts to ensure that marginalized individuals are not only welcomed but also supported in their participation in

various activities and social spheres. Social inclusion requires active efforts to create safe, respectful spaces where people can express their identities and fully participate in society. It means enabling individuals from diverse backgrounds to thrive and contribute.

Value of Indigenous Cultures and Knowledge

Even though there are similarities within Sámi society, "there is not one Sámi indigenous culture, but many subcultures" (Melbøe et al., 2016, p. 5). This could be connected to the larger issue of knowledge regarding Sámi and the education system that is working on incorporating knowledge about Sámi languages and cultures. While the understanding of inclusion between Sámi and non-Indigenous participants reflected the 'mainstream' understanding of inclusion, such as participation, diverse perspectives, being seen, heard, feeling welcomed, and a sense of belonging (Brix et al., 2022; Cobigo et al., 2016; Martin & Cobigo, 2011), the cultural, social, historical, and linguistic aspects were not considered by non-Indigenous participants. In sports and in the bid planning process, through personal experience and acquiring máhttu (the skill), we can see that the awareness and knowledge of those working with Indigenous inclusion, changes in a way that the nuances and importance of working with Indigenous issues come forward, be that Indigenous (P10) or non-Indigenous participants (P4). While the overall inclusion discourse within the Norwegian mainstream sports system has advanced over the years, we call for a greater attention to inclusion policies and practices regarding Sámi and other ethnic minorities living in Norway, especially taking into consideration the historical needs and backgrounds.

Historical and Current Needs and Backgrounds

Inclusion programs should be shaped in ways that recognize the specific histories, experiences, and needs of Indigenous Peoples and ethnic minorities, particularly in light of past policies like Norwegianization, as overlooking these factors may reinforce existing barriers to inclusion. *As Indigenous cultures and knowledge are highly contextual, there is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to inclusion policy design or a bidding process for a sports event. Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing are not only rooted in the traditions and land but are also shaped and transformed by the historical processes within the nation-state borders. These differences can be seen not only through the political and sports systems, but also through individual experiences.*

CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to examine how social inclusion of Indigenous Peoples is understood and experienced in the context of organized sports and bidding processes of sports mega-events. The study highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of social inclusion for Indigenous Peoples in the realm of sport, specifically focusing on Sámi. We have demonstrated that while there are some shared understandings of inclusion between Sámi and non-Indigenous individuals, significant differences in the perceptions and experiences of inclusion persist. These differences are often shaped by assimilationist undertones, which emphasize concepts such as common goals and values, yet fall short of addressing the deeper issues of discrimination, decolonization, and reconciliation. This gap in understanding is further exemplified by the lack of concrete, inclusive policies within the sport system, as seen in the absence of specific programs for Sámi, and in the exclusion of Sámi perspectives during key decision-making processes in the Tromsø 2014 and 2018 bids.

In addition, this gap is prevailing since non-Indigenous participants possess knowledge *about* inclusion and Sámi possess a deeper, experiential knowledge *in* inclusion and their own identity. This distinction underlines the importance of centering Indigenous voices and perspectives in discussions of social inclusion, as their lived experiences provide critical insights that are often overlooked in mainstream discourses.

Our findings also challenge the (non-Indigenous) assumption of a homogenous Sámi identity. Therefore, there is a need for a more nuanced approach that recognizes the diversity within Sámi cultures and languages. This distinction is often neglected in broader discussions of Indigenous inclusion, as evidenced by the lack of attention to intra-cultural variations, even among participants with Sámi heritage working within the Norwegian sports system. By incorporating Sámi voices and experiences, our study offers a more holistic and inclusive understandings of social inclusion than is typically presented by and prevailing within the Norwegian sport system and literature connected to social inclusion in sports. This research not only underscores the need for more inclusive practices but also calls for a deeper engagement with the historical, cultural, and socio-political dimensions of Indigenous inclusion in sport. Therefore, inclusion of Indigenous People from the start in all aspects of planning, especially for sports mega-events, which are typically created within the sport-for-all ethos.

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